Testimony of
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on
Agricultural Air Quality Task Force

Before the
Subcommittee on Forestry, Resource Conservation, and Research
Committee on Agriculture
United States House of Representatives

April 23, 1997
Washington, D.C.

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE:

Thank you for the opportunity this morning to discuss the Agricultural Air Quality Task Force. In my remarks, I will briefly describe how the Agricultural Air Quality Task Force was formed, what the Task Force has done thus far, and what I envision the role of the Task Force will be in the future. I will also highlight a few examples of the important interaction between agriculture and air quality.

INTRODUCTION:

Since the dramatic realization of the seriousness of soil erosion by wind during the Dust Bowl era of the 1930's, air quality concerns have gained steadily growing attention. Today, there is an increasing concern over the world's climate and its ability to produce food and fiber. There is no doubt that the ability to produce sufficient food is influenced by society and the actions taken by humans. The use and management of private land has changed constantly in response to economic, social, and environmental forces; however, the amount of cropland in the United States has remained essentially the same since the 1920's. During those intervening decades, changes in agricultural markets, technology, and practice have dramatically affected the location and use of that cropland.

It is reported in a recent Foreign Agriculture Service publication, "Grain: World Markets and Trade", that the world has consumed more grain than it has produced in seven

out of the last ten years. This has occurred at the same time that the nation's corn reserves have decreased from a high of 4.8 billion bushels in 1986 to approximately 1 billion bushels in recent years. By reducing stocks, the nation has chosen to reduce storage costs but has also accepted the risk that natural disasters could push our needed reserves beyond the existing levels. By accepting these higher risks, society may face food production problems in the future should such natural disasters occur. Furthermore, if constraints on food production are imposed in order to achieve complete mitigation of problems associated with a single resource, such as air quality, without regard for all the resources involved in agricultural production, society may even sooner be faced with a food production problem. However, these risks can be decreased by ensuring that the combined effects of our conservation efforts are appropriately considered when dealing with private farmland across our nation. "Changes in land use obviously affect the landscape and the environment. The first step in helping to ensure that those changes are not harmful is to evaluate current land use trends and assess how well the basic natural resources – soil, water, air, plants, and animals – are faring. Thorough evaluation and assessment enable landowners to use and manage their land within its capabilities" (*A Geography of Hope*, p. 23). I believe that the two million good people who manage the natural resources on private farmland have the capability to add much more than just the economic gain of our nation. These dedicated folks are the key to maintaining the health of our soil, water, plant, air and animal resources.

THE AGRICULTURAL AIR QUALITY TASK FORCE

During the development of the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 (FAIRA), the Administration and Congress recognized the important relationship between agriculture and air quality. As part of section 391 of FAIRA, Congress recognized that the agricultural community has an extensive and ongoing research capability "to determine the true extent to which agricultural activities contribute to air pollution and to

determine cost-effective ways in which the agricultural industry can reduce any pollution that exists". This highlights the capabilities of the Land Grant Universities, 1890 Universities, Cooperative Research, and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) agencies like the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), Economic Research Service (ERS), Forest Service, and National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS). Congress also charged the Secretary of Agriculture to strengthen the Department's capability to accomplish appropriate air quality research. Congress felt that agricultural research provides the best opportunity to understand the multi-resource dimensions of agricultural air quality and to appropriately quantify opportunities to assist in providing clean air for the nation.

Congress also charged the Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to set up an Agricultural Air Quality Task Force to provide advice and counsel in addressing agricultural air quality issues. This task force, made up of USDA employees, industry representatives, and other experts in the fields of agriculture and air quality, will advise the Secretary on any existing or proposed Federal regulatory air quality policies that impact production agriculture. It is also to review applicable science relevant to agriculture that underpins the requirements of the Clean Air Act in providing counsel to the Secretary. It will also provide independent analyses of the present state of research in agricultural air quality and advise the Secretary on actions needed to strengthen that capability.

On August 22, 1996, a formal request for nominations to the Task Force was published in the Federal Register resulting in over forty applicants. In January, 1997, twenty people were selected by the Secretary and accepted positions on the Task Force. These individuals represent a balance between farmers and ranchers, agriculture industry, scientists, and health advocates. The Task Force represents a spectrum of farmers and ranchers from small to large production operations and represents all six NRCS regions of the United States. A roster of the Agricultural Air Quality Task Force is provided for the record.

The first public meeting of the Agriculture Air Quality Task Force was held in Washington, D. C., on March 5-6, 1997. The meeting started with a short discussion of each individual's biases and perspectives. As Chair, I cautioned that USDA was not asking Task Force members to be advocates for any specific cause, only to share their expertise and ideas. I also reminded attendees that we are on a long journey and it has taken a long time to get where we are today. The actual minutes of the meeting will be provided for the record and anyone can access them, as well as the minutes of future meetings, on the Internet at http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov.

The Task Force has recommended several future actions. The first action agreed upon was to offer the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) the use of this body to provide advice and counsel to the Administrator on agricultural air quality issues through the development of a Memorandum of Understanding. We are currently drafting this document and expect to begin discussions with EPA soon. The Task Force has tentatively scheduled the next meeting for June 17-19, in Fresno, CA. Other topics that likely will be the focus of further study by working groups of the Task Force may include greenhouse gas emissions and climate change; volatile organic acids and ammonia associated with livestock wastes contributing to surface air pollution; and, odor and visibility which are of particular concern in areas of urban growth and in pristine natural areas.

AGRICULTURE AND AIR QUALITY

EPA's review and subsequent proposals to revise the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) for ozone and particulate matter (PM) have raised several questions about the effects these proposals could have on agriculture. USDA has been involved in the interagency review process for the NAAQS proposals since August, 1994. We continue to work with EPA and other Federal agencies through the Office of Management and Budget in an effort to fully understand the potential effects these proposals could have.

USDA has also submitted technical comments to the EPA docket. We believe these comments and others we have made in interagency meetings have affected the NAAQS process, especially the preparation of the NAAQS Regulatory Impact Analysis. USDA will continue to support and participate in this process until final decisions are made on these NAAQS revisions.

USDA scientists have also played an important role in the development of the NAAQS revisions. Scientists for the ARS, NRCS, and the Forest Service have helped to develop the scientific information that documents the negative effects of ozone on plants. Exposure to levels of ozone substantially below the current 1-hour standard has been shown to produce significant reductions in plant productivity and their ability to survive. These negative effects could affect row crops like corn and soybeans as well as trees and ornamental shrubs. USDA is continuing to develop scientific and economic analysis of this issue for possible consideration in the implementation phase of the NAAQS process.

Many of the concerns expressed by the Department in the interagency process and in our technical comments are related to the implementation of programs to control emissions in each affected airshed. When local air quality administrators make decisions about which pollution control programs to implement they will consider factors such as the percentage of the total pollution in the airshed that is caused by a specific activity or source, and costs and benefits of implementing a set of controls on these activities and sources. Agriculture is practiced throughout the country using many different technologies on a variety of soils and in a variety of climates. Conditions, technology, and practices, along with a number of other factors, determine emissions. Agricultural emissions are highly variable within and across airsheds and must be evaluated carefully.

Specifically, USDA is concerned about the characterization of pollution in particular airsheds. Where does the pollution come from, and what activity caused it? What percentage of the total pollution inventory results from an activity? Are there cost effective control strategies that reduce pollution while maintaining productivity? We believe a well

coordinated research program with Federal, State, and local participation is necessary in order to begin answering these questions. Without answers, controls could be costly and ineffective.

Some emissions will be controlled because farmers and ranchers are using good soil and water conservation practices and are keeping their equipment in good operating condition. USDA's conservation research, as well as conservation programs, should consider reductions in emissions that are detrimental to air quality to the greatest extent possible. The result will be more cost effective conservation programs that improve soil, water, and air quality.

SUMMARY

USDA supports the interagency NAAQS review process. The Department is committed to a policy of resource conservation and environmental quality. It is our goal to pass on cleaner air, cleaner water, and more productive farmland to future generations. We believe this can be done without jeopardizing our status as the most productive provider of food, fiber, and lumber in the history of the world. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on these important issues. I will be happy to answer any questions you have at this time.

Addendum to Testimony of Paul W. Johnson, Chief
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